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## Power and Vulnerability: Basis for Revolution?

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## Power and Vulnerability: Basis for Revolution?

### **Writing Process**

Throughout the semester, our history class explored the differences in relationships including political, economical, and social aspects. I found one of the most compelling comparisons to be how people of vulnerability have historically suffered because of their circumstances yet are able to learn that within their vulnerability comes strength and change. After the themes of power and vulnerability were presented to us in preparation for our trip to the ballet, I was able, during the production, to draw many similarities. After narrowing my topic to a certain event in history that explored these ideas, the Haitian revolution, I began to find sources to explore the connection more deeply.

Following meetings with my professor to discuss my ideas and revise my drafts, my final product conveyed the message I see throughout all of history and is still relevant today. Overall, I was pleased with my process for writing this paper and these themes will definitely carry over to my everyday life.

**Editor's note:** This paper received second prize (\$50).

### **Semester**

Fall

### **Instructor**

Tracey Jaffe

### **Year**

2018

# Power and Vulnerability: Basis for Revolution?

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*Katlin Pistone*

*This essay received second-place honors and a prize of \$50 in the Dracula: Bloodlines First-Year Arts Immersion essay contest sponsored by the Humanities Commons and the Dean's Office of the College of Arts and Sciences.*

The Dayton Ballet's performance of *Dracula: Bloodlines* demonstrates the different effects of vulnerability on humans, or in this case, vampires. After being transformed into a creature that can essentially live forever, Vlad is no longer vulnerable to death but is still consumed by his feeling of love. Ultimately, his newfound power cannot protect him from his vulnerability to love which, in the end, leads to his demise. The ballet's story of Dracula is a perfect illustration of how vulnerability can be powerful and how power can also lead to vulnerability.

In general, people of weakness or vulnerability are taken advantage of by those who hold power. A significant group historically oppressed includes slaves of African descent brought to the Americas as a part of the transatlantic slave trade between the 16th and 19th century. This continuous enslavement forced many to mainland North America, while the largest number was sent to South America and Caribbean regions. One of the most famous slave plantation colonies, Saint Domingue, was home to a testament of the relationship between power and vulnerability, the Haitian Revolution. Just as Vlad's struggle with love was internal, the vulnerability that led to the downfall of the French government in Haiti also developed internally.

Saint Domingue claimed the title of France's most profitable colony largely due its largest export, sugar cane. Yet, these crops did not tend themselves;

therefore, the use of slave labor was the only thing keeping the economic success of these crops afloat. The unbearable conditions in Saint Domingue, including the hot and humid climate, led to diseases such as malaria and yellow fever.

Vulnerability to sickness, combined with the harsh treatment by slave owners, resulted in an extremely high slave mortality rate. With new shipments arriving almost daily, owners provided bare necessities to their slaves because it was cheaper to work them until they died and simply buy new healthier ones. Despite the seemingly weak position of slaves, they were able to find strength within their vulnerability. Slaves were able to find the courage and power to embark on the almost impossible task to fight for their freedom (Ferrer).

On August 26, 1789 the *Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen* by the *National Convention* was approved, the French were put in a position in which they were attempting to uphold Enlightenment values while also maintaining the institution of slavery. This sparked an ongoing controversy between many revolutionaries and the slaves that they must reveal the true hypocrisy of the actions of the French. Comparable to Vlad's position, the French were able to obtain a high position of power and were unsuspecting of how this could expose their vulnerabilities. This oppressive slave regime, while attempting to dismiss the ideas of the French Revolution, was unaware of the internal repercussions this revolution could cause. To maintain control over the colony, France passed legislation regarding who would be represented in government and possess political power. Because of the new revolutionary ideals, this created a division of the elite, including white and mixed races. The famous quote, "a house divided cannot stand," signifies this struggle that potentially resulted in a civil war. Fighting soon broke out between throughout Haiti during the revolution, exposing the vulnerabilities of French rule, and revealing possibilities for the rebel slaves. This opportunity eventually led to one of the largest and most successful slave rebellions in history. The revolution lasted from 1791 until 1804 culminating in defeat of the French regime, the slaves declared the nation independent and renamed it Haiti: thus creating the first independent nation in the Caribbean, the first black republic in the world and only the second independent nation in the Western Hemisphere. Napoleon had risen to political authority in France and determined the need to reinstate firmer control of the colony of Saint Domingue. In order to do this, he planned to send an army to re-establish French leadership and reinstitute slavery in the colony (Kloppe). Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former Haitian slave that later became one of the most successful leaders of the rebellion,

wrote a letter of truth to the new conservative government, the Directory, after hearing of Napoleon's plan to send troops. He warned that although he was loyal to the French government, the slaves would not allow the soldiers to take their freedom, even if that led to violence. Slaves came together in their time of vulnerability to find the power to prevent enslavement of their people again. L'Ouverture stated "But if, to reestablish slavery in San Domingo, this was done, then I declare to you it would be to attempt the impossible: we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it" (L'Ouverture, 219). Through this quote he spoke the truth slaves learned through their vulnerability, they had developed a sense of unity through their hardships. Because of this unity and power, the Africans would stop at nothing to rebel against French rule and maintain their freedom.

This rebellion inspired future slave rebellions throughout the Caribbean and provides the perfect example of how power and vulnerability are often intertwining themes. Despite the negative connotation of vulnerability, strength and truth can be found within it. Rather than falling into defeat, the slaves were able to embrace their vulnerability and use it to empower their cause. On the other hand, French rulers were so invested in their power they were unable to recognize their vulnerabilities. Again, vulnerability does not have to be a weakness, and power does not have to be abusive, life should be about finding a way to utilize both.

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